MARY BANKS, LEADING LADY OF WEST POINT

Matron and Mascot, She is Eighty-Two Years Old, So It Is About Time She Was Written Up. Generals Knew Her When They Were Cadets; She Remembers the Mothers of Girls at Cadet Hops

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"Oh, you darling, you are the prettiest girl here to-night"

"I saw the little skimps from the navy were in the field"

MARY BANKS! The Belle of West Point! Through a period of almost fifty years Mary Banks has reigned supreme. She is the central figure at all West Point balls. She wins blue ribbons for West Point horses. She wins baseball games for Army nines. She has mothered bachelor officers for over two generations. And there is not an army officer who has ever visited West Point who has not called Mary "one of the most lovable old souls I have ever met."

Cullum Memorial Hall at West Point to the casual visitor is the building where cadets and officers hold their hops—a West Point term for dances. In the lower part of this building are suites of rooms for bachelor and visiting officers, and it is here that Mary Banks reigns supreme. A major escorted me to Mary Banks's quarters.

There we found the woman who I had heard could win athletic events for Army contestants. Eighty-two years old. Her hair turned to a becoming shade of gray, short of stature, wearing a black cotton dress, a pair of dark, rougish eyes behind gold trimmed spectacles—there was Mary Banks. The major introduced us.

"How do I win ball games?" repeated Mary Banks. "Well, sir—I don't really know. It's just luck and 'my tree.' I'll tell you how we licked the Navy a few weeks back.

"You know the Navy boys were confident they'd win the annual ball game this year. Hans Lobert, who used to be a Giant ball player—he's our coach, you know—he had the boys in as good trim as was possible. The day of the big game arrived. Through this confounded daylight savin' and standard time mix-up I got my times mixed and—glory be! The first thing I knew I heard an officer call down the corridor which leads to my rooms: 'Mary Banks—we're losing—get out under your tree!'

"Golly, sir, I runs for the side door—up the steps I goes. People must-a thought I was crazy, as old as I am, and runnin' like a young critter. Just across the street is the ball field, and in deep left center field is 'my tree'—a fine elm.

"I saw the little skimps from the navy was in the field. A fine, big-chested army lad was on first base and another was on second. With the score 6 to 4 in favor of the Navy, a fine, husky cadet cames to bat. 'Strike one!' calls the thievin' umpire. 'Strike two!' he bellows a minute later. But I knew my old luck would prove true. Bang! Way up into the heavens went the next ball pitched. I pulled hard, sir. I pulled with all my might. 'En do you know that ball dropped at my feet—right out under my tree in deep left center field. It was what the boys call a home run hit. West Point won and didn't the officers and army folks holler! It was a grand victory. I hurried back to my rooms. All our folks were dancin' for joy."

Mary Banks's cheeks flushed as she recounted the story of the Army-Navy baseball game.

"Are you sure it was just luck?" I asked.

"Sure, I'm the luckiest critter in the world. It was just my luck."

As it had been arranged that I was to stay at Cullum Hall over night I did not tell Mary Banks that I wrote for a newspaper. It was my idea to put her ability to win sporting events to a test. I brought out a catalogue of the West Point horse show, which was going on that day. Mary stated that she did not know who was entered in the different events, so I read a list of the entries.

The name of Major J. K. Brown attracted her ear. After I had found an event in which he was to compete against outside talent I asked Mary Banks if she could make him win.

"Major Brown is a fine officer. I'll try, sir. I'll do my darnedest."

When I arrived at the horse show the hall was crowded. The cadets occupied the tiers of seats at the south end. People socially prominent throughout the entire world sat in boxes erected on the west and east sides of the ring. Debutantes and the younger set sat in the galleries and the West Point Band was playing a snappy tune.

The event in which Major J. K. Brown was entered was just being called. It was a saddle horse competition. I squirmed through the crowd to the edge of the ring, where the editor of a famous horse publication was standing. I pointed out the Major to the editor, who is considered an authority on all classes of horses.

"I doubt if Brown will win on that horse," he said. "The horse belongs to the army post at West Point and is competing against horses of distinction which are owned by people who can afford to pay any price for a winner. However," added the editor, "one can never tell just how a horse will do."

The contest started. It was one of the feature events. The ringmaster blew his bugle and the horses lined up near the judges' stand. The judges held a long discussion—then W. S. Blitz, secretary of the State Horse Show Association, handed a blue ribbon to one of the judges.

The judge walked to the horse ridden by Major J. K. Brown and pinned the ribbon over the horse's head. The spectators applauded loudly. I looked at the ground and stamped a matchstick into the dirt. Then I applauded—not for Major Brown—not for his prize winning horse—but for Mary Banks. To me this was a victory for Mary—an eighty-two-year-old woman who makes rabbits' feet, four-leaf clovers and wishbones look like so much junk.

That night the cadets held their big hops of the year. There were no graduation exercises at West Point this year because of the early graduations due to the war. Pretty girls came from as far away as the Pacific Coast to take part in the June Week festivities.

So far as color is concerned, a West Point cadet hop is extremely pleasing to the eye. The cadets in full dress uniform and the girls in attractive evening dresses in a hall especially decorated for the occasion.

Near the entrance stood Mary Banks, dressed in a black silk dress. Her hair fixed in cadet hop style, cheeks glowing and eyes dancing, Mary Banks greeted each girl who entered the building.

"Oh, you darling," she would say, "you are the prettiest girl here to-night. I'll just be betting the cadets will be walking on each other's feet trying to get dances with you."

After I had seen at least a dozen girls blush with pride at this greeting I accused Mary Banks of being a great jollier.

"Oh, listen, sir," she explained. "Doesn't the good Lord want us to make people happy? He hates gloom spreaders, and, sir, there are always more cadets than girls, and it's always true the girls will have more requests for dances than they can give. So there isn't any harm done."

Mary beckoned to a good-looking brunet who was passing. "Isn't your name Stevenson, my dear?" asked Mary.

"No, but that was my mother's name."

"To be sure," said Mary. "Your mother was here about thirty years ago, and I am positive it was a light blue dress I wore."

An officer tapped me upon the arm, and we left Mary Banks to continue her discussion.

"Mary never forgets a face," explained the officer. "She can remember every girl who has attended a hop for fifty years back. She is a wizard at remembering names."

The hall where the hops are held is on the second floor of Cullum Hall. Except when Mary Banks stands under her tree to win ball games for the Army nine she seldom leaves the building.

A story was told the writer of an occurrence several years ago which shows how often Mary Banks leaves Cullum Hall. In 1910 the old West Point chapel was moved to the grounds of the West Point cemetery. Each stone was marked and the chapel rebuilt in the cemetery exactly as it had been on its old site where the East Academic Building now stands. The chapel was then turned into a mortuary chapel, where many prominent officers have been buried and where the uninscribed tablet to Benedict Arnold is placed. The chapel also contains the only four British flags in existence which were captured by the American army. The other British flags were destroyed when the British burned Washington in the War of 1812.

One day in 1912, two years after the chapel had been dedicated, Mary decided to visit the cemetery and place flowers on her husband's grave. When she reached the cemetery she saw the old chapel.

"My Gawd, sir," she exclaimed to an officer who was near by, "somebody's moved the chapel."

Mary Banks's husband, Sergeant Charlie Banks, died May 14, 1901. Sergeant Banks had been severely wounded in the Indian wars and when he returned to West Point, where his wife lived, he was an invalid and became a great care to Mary. One of the famous West Point stories about Mary Banks is an account of how one morning she had a little squabble with her husband.

Sergeant Banks was resting in a huge chair outside Mary's quarters when a colonel passed by.

"How's Banks this morning?" called the colonel to Mary.

"My, sir," replied Mary, "I wish the man 'd get well—or do something."

In the bachelor quarters Mary Banks takes care of the officers like a mother. She calls the officers in the morning. She enters their rooms when they go out and looks over their clothing. Missing buttons are replaced. Tears are mended, and Mary never remarks about anything she has done.

The next morning I asked Major M. J. Keeler, who had been in the Battle of the Marne and was a great favorite with Mary Banks, if he would ask her to pose under "her tree," so that the photographer could take her picture. I also requested the Major to tell Mary that she was to be written up in the newspapers.

We left for Mary's rooms.

"Mary! Oh, Mary!" called Major Keeler.

From around the corner of a corridor hobbled Mary. "I'm comin', sir. What can I do fer you on such a fine day?"

"We've come to take your picture for the newspapers," explained the major.

"The newspapers!" exclaimed Mary. "Why I've not been divorced or nothin', have I?"

The major placed an arm about the old, motherly-looking woman and led her out to the front of Cullum Hall.

"Listen, sir," said Mary on the way. "If I'd a known what yer wanted I'd 'a been hidin' under the bed."

"And I'd have been there to pull you out," laughed Major Keeler.

"But, major, I'd 'a' kicked my heels like an army mule," replied Mary, her roguish, dark eyes plainly showing she enjoyed the attention she was receiving.

Out front Mary posed beneath "her tree." All officers who passed called a cheery welcome to the old woman. The young wife of a major happened along. The girl was good looking, a picture of youth and life. Mary's wrinkled face appeared above an old-fashioned black dress. The girl stopped by the photographer.

"Do you know," she said, "you couldn't take a better picture of the spirit of West Point than Mary Banks? We just love her."

Major Keeler led Mary back to her quarters and asked her to tell me about her trophies which she had received from famous people.

I gazed about Mary's quarters. Her bedroom contained a regular white enameled army cot, a small writing table, upon which was a picture of a crucifix, and one could easily imagine this sweet old woman kneeling before it and praying, especially in war times. There were a chiffonier, three rockers, two trunks, a wardrobe, and Mary's room was complete.

She told me she preferred to live army style, "'Cause that's always best."

In talking about her presents Mary became shy. She refused to open her trunk, which I was told contained numerous gifts from many officers, but she showed me a huge silver loving cup which had been presented to her in 1909 by a group of officers. On the cup were the names of Major Bell and Major Howes, both now generals. The cup is three feet high and twenty-seven inches in diameter.

"One evening," explained Mary. "A bunch of those officers came a-sneakin' in here. One officer presented the cup and made a fine speech. 'En then they cheered until I had to put them out for fear they'd wake up some of my officers who were tryin' to get in a little early evening sleep because they were goin' somewheres which would take all night."

In talking to Mary about life in general it was obvious that Mary Banks believes there is nothing but good in this world.

"I don't believe people are as bad as the papers say. When I left Ireland—it's years back now—there was no shootin' nor trouble, I believe, sir, the papers is liars. It can't be.

"'En murders—why, if any one wus to come here and say, 'Mary Banks, I'm goin' to shoot you.' I'd laugh inter the gun, 'cause God wouldn't let any one shoot me, leastways unless I deserved it. And I hope I don't."

"After one has almost lived their whole life," went on Mary, "this life on earth seems to be of so little consequence. Just think of all the long, happy years after death. Why shouldn't people try and be good, so's God will keep them forever and ever? But, sir, why do you want all this information? Sure no one is interested in the likes of Mary Banks."

An officer who had entered the room answered the question.

"Mary, every army officer who sees your picture in the paper will cut it out and save it. We all just love you, and you know it, too. Some women have to be divorced to get into the newspapers, but you just have to be plain Mary Banks."

The old woman looked off into the distance through her side window, which overlooked the Hudson River. She said softly:

"I try to be good, sir, and I'm glad if people thinks I've been."

GRADUALLY WE GET SOMEWHERE

WE are a great people, as plenty of orators will be reminding us today and to-morrow, and we are constantly progressing in little ways and by small degrees that do not always comprehend. From various corners of the country come reports which show how we are inching along, all unbeknown to ourselves.

One, for instance, from Kansas City, tells about a nine-year-old girl who has her own bank account. She is said to be perfectly familiar with bank procedure and makes out her own checks for candy and such things, and even pays her school tuition fees that way.

It is said that when this youngster walked into one of the largest banks in Kansas City and established her account, the official who waited on her was nearly overcome with astonishment. Therein is where the example of this Kansas City prodigy should prove helpful. Something is needed to break the cold austerity of the average bank—and child depositors will do it. The teller who glories in his ability to fix the grown-up depositor with an eye so cold and calculating that the man in front of the window feels insignificant to the final degree will be wasting all his mental refrigeration when he deals with customers who are of kindergarten age. An ingenious child, with a bank book clutched in its chubby hand, would make nothing of all the formality that is now so effective behind the cages of our foremost financial institutions. A teller whose slightest glance of suspicion would make an honest man feel like a river pirate would be helpless before a lisping child who had just scrawled a none too decipherable check.

And of what avail will be the studied dignity of a bank president, waylaid in the quiet of his office by a depositor from the nearest school, who wants to know why she has been notified that her bank account has been overdrawn when she knows by her own infallible figures that she still has a credit amounting to the price of four ice cream sodas?

One can imagine the scene in a bank just prior to a holiday, when kindergarten has just let out and all the juvenile depositors have come in for funds sufficient to provide moving picture entertainment. The bank resounds to such childish cries as:

"Why didn't they give me a pretty red bankbook like yours?"

"I always make my indorsements upside down."

"The pens in this bank are almost as bad as the ones in the postoffice."

"I'm sure there was a mistake in the last statement you sent me."

"I sent Brother Freddie down with a deposit of 10 cents to balance my account and he swallowed the money. I don't have to pay it, do I?"

No, it must be admitted that when the example of this little girl in Kansas City is followed generally throughout the country there will be only shreds of the oldtime dignity observable in and about the average bank.

Another news note which tends to upset some fine old traditons comes from Denver.

A young woman cashier, on her way home at night, carried a small automatic clutched in her right hand. This weapon she emptied into a man who attempted to rob her. It is believed that not a shot missed a vital spot. Anyway, the man was quite dead when the police arrived.

Now comes the note of progress. The coroner of the county in which Denver is situated came to the conclusion that something more was demanded of him and his faithful jurors than a mere cut-and-dried acquittal of the young woman. At the inquest, where the woman appeared merely to fulfill the formalities of the occasion, the coroner made an elaborate and choicely worded speech. He commended the young woman for her marksmanship and said that if the West had more of her sex with such determination and such skill in sending leaden pellets toward their billets, the trade of highway robbery would degenerate into a strictly Eastern institution.

Then the coroner presented the young woman with a large bouquet of roses which he and the thoughtful jurors had sent out and bought for the occasion.

The success of the affair was such that no doubt it will lead to a general and needed improvement of the line of procedure in all such cases. Coroners will be elected because of their ability as orators and there will be color and warmth in the cases of acquittals growing out of jutifiable homicides. Individuals who have slain under such circumstances will not leave the coroner's inquests inwardly protesting against the stodginess of the affairs. Instead of a scant stickful or two, the acquitted person can cut for scrapbook purposes an entire column or more, including the coroner's speech in full and the reporter's description of the floral offering. The person thus turned free will have no cause to feel that he or she escaped merely because it was a lucky day.

The only thing missing in the account of the affair in Denver is fitting music to the coroner's acquittal speech. Perhaps this will come later. Too much cannot be expected of a reform at the outset. As pointed out, it is enough to know that we are making progress by inches.